LOYOLA COMMENCEMENT

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Mrs. Shaughnessy would be proud.

I grew up in an industrial town in Western Pennsylvania and spent most of my childhood playing in the alley with John and Francie Shaughnessy — the two youngest children of a large Catholic family which included Sister Hilda who used to fill us with a sense of awe and dread when she came home for a visit and swept up the sidewalk in her black habit. In that alley also were Frank and Carol Estep — Baptists who spent a lot of time at church, twice on Sunday and every Wednesday night, who could quote, and did, the Bible a lot, and whose parents did not drink, smoke, swear or read the Sunday comics — which set them apart from both the Shaughnessy's and my family.

We lived between them — and a good thing, too — because there was a fair amount of theological and ecclesiastical tension in the air. They used to argue a lot, I recall, about the Pope and whose church was really the church and about who was going to heaven and who was going hell — about which both sides were absolutely certain. We didn't talk much about heaven and hell in my house. We were Presbyterians — not very zealous Presbyterians at that. And our great gift to the ecumenical peace of the neighborhood was that the Shaughnessy's and the Estep's agreed — the only thing they agreed on — was that the Presbyterians between them were surely going to hell.

So Mrs. Shaugnessy is smiling, I am sure, as little Johnny Buchanan receives an honorary degree from and addresses the graduates of a Jesuit University, of all things.

We have come a long way — thanks be to God…and we have a long way to go. But on this occasion, this life-long Presbyterian is deeply grateful to Loyola University, President Father Michael Garanzini, the Board of Trustees and you, the winter graduates, for this profound honor. Thank you.

Commencement speeches are a peculiar phenomenon. Someone did a study to see what graduates remembered of their graduation day ten years later. The speakers were pretty low on the list. The content of commencement addresses didn't even make the list.

A Doonesbury column portrayed this event — a university graduation. Three robed graduates are staring blankly ahead. One is reading *Vogue* magazine. Another is plugged into his walkman. The third looks up to the podium and asks, "Who's the old guy?" His friend responds, "I think he the President." The questioner asks, "Of what?"

We do subject ourselves to a lot of rhetoric because everybody knows it is an important occasion, a defining moment if you will, a real milestone preceded by a lot of work and investment — on your part — intellectually, physically, emotionally, and not the least, financially. You have a lot riding on this occasion. And for most of you, so do your families. Parents like graduations. They are proud and happy. And some of them are thinking right now, "Tomorrow we are going to be rich."

And the institution is deeply invested. The administration hopes you have paid your bills and will now become a contributor, which is an altogether good thing to do and a necessary thing I hasten to add — to keep this enterprise vital and strong for your children.

And the faculty will remember you and follow you and will watch attentively as your future enfolds. They hope you will remember their names — which I know you will.

This event happens at a critical moment in our history. We are all a little bit tired of hearing September 11 referenced in every public utterance and, yet, there is truth to the overused euphemism that we live in a very different world now. And my proposal to you this morning, in this extraordinary time, my admonition and my prayer for you is that you will respond to this moment in history and this important moment in your histories with — courage.

The Courage to Be is the title of one of the most important books of my generation, written by the late Paul Tillich, one of the most important philosophers and theologians of the last century, a refugee from Nazi Germany. Tillich wrote:

> "Courage as the universal and essential self-affirmation of one's being is an ontological concept. The courage to be is the ethical act in which humans affirm their own being in spite of those elements of their existence which conflict with their essential self-affirmation." [Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, Yale University Press, 1952, p.3]

William Shakespeare said that a little more poetically and clearly: Hamlet laments, "O God! God! How weary, stale and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world."

And then in lines that put the matter powerfully and clearly:

> "To be, or not to be: that is the question."

The late Rollo May, psychiatrist, philosopher, wrote a lot about it.

> "Courage," he said, "is not one virtue out of many: it is the foundation of all virtue. Courage is necessary to make being possible. Acorns become oak trees and kitten become cats automatically. But a man or woman becomes fully human only by his or her choices. People attain worth and dignity only by the multitudes of decisions they make day to day. Those decisions require courage." [*The Courage to Create*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1975, p. 4,5]

The truth is — and if you haven't discovered it yet, you will — the truth is that life sometimes knocks the courage to be out of us. Paul Tillich said, "There are elements of existence which conflict with our essential self-affirmation." What was he talking about? Well, fear, for instance. Fear of the future. Fear of failing. Fear of criticism. Fear of death. Fear causes us to give up, give in, lower our sights, expectations, hopes, aspirations and choose non-being instead of being.

Isn't that what happens every time you and I decline to try something adventuresome and demanding and exciting because we're afraid we might fail, or that we'll be inconvenienced, or that we don't know how it will turn out? Isn't that what happens when you and I look out at the world and see a multitude of horrendous problems and shudder, or wring our hands and then turn our backs? We see, for instance, a political and educational system that can't seem to figure out how to pay for quality education for all our children; a healthcare system that cannot seem to get services to all the sick people; an urban environment characterized by a crisis in the simple existence of civil society, enclaves of second and third generation unemployed men and adolescent mothers, selling drugs to and shooting at one another. Isn't it a denial of our being as humans, to walk away from all that and retreat to privileged enclaves of affluence?

The courage to be, the will to choose life can be knocked out of us…in the very middle of life by a variety of things.

Bob Greene wrote a thoughtful column a few weeks ago, which recalled Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous statement during the Depression: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," and how it reassured a frightened nation. Greene suggested that it's different since September 11, that if all we have to fear is fear itself — it's enough. "Today," he wrote, "fear is not a byproduct — it is the primary item. Evidently those who attacked us do not

want our land, our riches, our buildings. What they want is our terror… Fear itself is their goal." [Bob Greene, Chicago Tribune 12/17/2001]

And as a matter of fact the fear quotient among us has escalated significantly, amplified by occasional announcements from the new Department of Homeland Security and the FBI that something terrible might happen somewhere to someone and so we all should be alert. Which translates — be frightened. "Fear," Bob Greene thinks, "is the new currency of the land — a new industry, a way of life."

We've always known that the power of fear as a motivator and market force. Fear sells car alarms and security systems. Fear sells guns — ironically increasing significantly the possibility that they will be used to shoot and kill members of one's own family. Fear causes population shifts as refugees move across international borders and as city dwellers head to the suburbs.

And fear limits and paralyzes. Fear of failing prevents us from trying something new, stretching and risking. Children humiliated by a teacher are afraid to speak up and ask a question — sometimes for the rest of their lives. Fear of rejection keeps us from going out for the team, trying out for the part, applying for the job, saying, "I love you, I want you." Someone said that if Michelangelo had been afraid of heights, we'd have the Sistine Chapel floor.

There is something paralyzing about fear, something that reduces the scope of our lives, the extent of our love, the depth of our passion, the generosity of our giving.

Bob Greene is right. There are a lot of shaking hands and trembling knees in our nation this year. It will be important not to give the terrorists the victory of terrifying us, diminishing us, limiting and restricting us, convincing us to live out of fear and not love and kindness and compassion and courage.

Popular novelist Barbara Kingsolver wrote in the aftermath of September 11th:

> "There are millions of us, surely, who know how to look life in the eye however awful things get, and still try to love it back."

And it all begins — not only in the halls of government and boardrooms of big business. It begins here in your heart — where we decide to live fully, in spite of all the reasons not to care, to dream in spite of the heavy weight of current reality.

Dr. Bernie Siegel, a surgeon and professor at Yale Medical School, author of several best sellers, works directly with people who are very sick. Hearing the three words, "You have cancer," often destroys the will to live, the courage to be. So Siegel works hard to nurture the fundamental will to live, to be within each of his patients, no matter how little or much time they have left.

One of them, an 85 year-old woman, gave him a poem that she wrote:

> "If I had my life to live over…
> I would take more chances,
> I would take more trips,
> I would scale more mountains,
> Swim more rivers,
> Watch more sunsets,
> Eat more ice cream and fewer beans.
> I would have more actual troubles
> And fewer imaginary ones. You see…
> I was one of those people who lived
> Prophylactically and sensibly and sanely,
> Hour after hour and day after day…
> I've been one of those people who never went
> Anywhere without
> A thermometer, a hot water bottle, a gargle,
> A raincoat and a parachute…
> If I had it to do all over again,
> I'd travel lighter, much lighter…
> I would start barefoot earlier
> In the spring, and I'd stay that way
> Late in the fall. And I would
> Ride more merry-go-rounds, and
> Catch more gold rings, and greet
> More people, and pick more flowers,
> And dance more often.
> If I had it
> To do all over again.
> But you see,
> I don't."
>
> [*Peace, Love and Healing,* Dr. Bernie Siegel, Harper Perennial Press, p. 245-246]

It's a choice finally: a personal decision we all make every day of our lives. The occasion for courage comes wrapped in choices: to love or not to love: to get involved or hold back: to serve and help or withdraw: to give your life to something important or to retreat and settle for a good credit rating and secure

retirement: to commit self passionately to some improbable and wonderful dream like the peace of the world, the reconciliation of God's people, the healing and feeding and housing of God's children beginning with the children in your own community — or staying at arm's length, the refusal to risk anything, being a spectator instead of a participant.

In Washington DC, with a few hours to spend, we visited the U.S. Holocaust Museum; an unrelenting three hours of pictures, exhibits, films, showing common good folk, implicated in grotesque evil by little choices, by averting their eyes, by refusing to care. And then, The Hall of Remembrance, a large room, quiet, with candles, a pool, and inscribed on the wall — a quotation from the Bible: from Hebrew scripture. Moses is the speaker: the children of Israel have been wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. But now they are at the river — on the other side of which is the unknown, the unexplored, the uncharted. They're frightened and Moses says:

> "…today I have set before you life an death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendents may live…"

So — in the midst of all the advice you will receive today, the good wishes for success and happiness, may I have the privilege of this challenge?

Don't be afraid. Have the courage to care passionately. Find something you care about enough to weep, and work; something to live for; something you love enough to die for.

The gift of live is given to us without condition. It is yours to live, to enjoy, to give. How you do that is a matter of courage.

The choice is yours this day…every day…The courage to be. God bless you on your way.